

The ffennell family and Wytham Woods

**Speech made by Mervyn Hughes on the unveiling of the
Oxfordshire blue plaque at Wytham Woods on 7 October 2017**

The Schumacher family had lived in the Brunswick part of Germany since at least the fifteenth century and always had important roles in the running of the area. August Schumacher was a Privy Councillor and worked for Frederick, Duke of Brunswick who was killed in the last battle before Waterloo. August fought for the Prussians at Waterloo in 1815. He belonged to the “Black Brunswickers”. August later married Fanny Marc in about 1823. One of their children was Erwin. His older sister married into the Wagau family which enabled Erwin to join the company, soon becoming a partner. The Wagau family had traded in Russia since 1839. Erwin moved to London and opened a Wagau office, then in 1903 he swore an “Oath of Allegiance” to the Crown. The company traded in “colonial and chemical” commodities, including Chinese tea, American cotton, West Indian sugar, and English wool. Every town or city had a Wagau agent, part of a huge network. At the outbreak of WW1 the company (in today’s money) was worth about 3 billion pounds.

All of Erwin’s six children were born in London: Erwin (Junior), Raymond, Gladys, Walter, Vera, and Elsa. Raymond attended Harrow School and then spent a year in Russia with Wagau before moving to South Africa in 1894. This was a boom time for deep-level gold mining, mainly in the Jo’burg area. Raymond may have known about (or perhaps more than that) the ill-fated “Jameson Raid” in 1896. He was arrested and questioned and was eventually released. (This was a failed attempt to remove the Boer Transvaal government, during a week-end). In that period Raymond became a director of “Eckstein’s” and other companies and was one of the first “Randlords”, as he built and rented many properties for workers, particularly the many Chinese employees.

Raymond fought on the same side as the British in the 2nd Boer War (1899–1902). He was a Captain in the Witwatersrand Rifles, guarding mines and equipment. He eventually became a Major and a Lt-Colonel (only for ceremonial occasions). By 1912 he was the senior director of the “Central Mining and Investment Corporation”, by then the largest industrial company in South Africa, establishing a personal fortune. Raymond, wife Hope, and daughter Hazel left South Africa in 1915 to live in England. Their house there, given by the family, became a Home for children with specific medical needs. Simon ffennell’s sister Diana visited the Home in 2016, with her husband. The Home is still thriving.

The Schumacher family soon bought a home in London, now part of the Russian Embassy. They also spent time in the Oxford area, probably due to their friendship with fellow old Harrovian Sir Arthur Evans. He lived at “Youlbury” on Boars Hill, at the site now used by the scout-movement. For part of 1916 until 1918, Raymond was

a Major in the Oxford University Officers' Training Corps. He was attached to the No. 4 Officer Cadet Battalion. C.S. Lewis was also a member of that battalion from April to Christmas 1917. The practice-trenches that were used for training still exist in Wytham Wood.

Having a German name in England at that time, during WW1, did not make the family very popular. In November 1917 the "London Gazette" announced that Raymond and Walter (Simon's grandfather) had changed their surname to ffennell, their mother's maiden name and the anglicised form of the Celtic name O'Fionghail. This was approved by King George V.

Weekends and holidays were taken in Wytham Wood from 1916/17 onwards and Raymond purchased the entire estate from the Earl of Abingdon in 1920. However, due to sitting-tenants they did not move into the Abbey until 1926. From 1926 onwards Colonel ffennell organised and encouraged small groups of schoolchildren to visit Hill End Camp which was part of the Wytham estate. The children with their teachers would go on nature-walks, recording and drawing finds. It is possible that Raymond was influenced by Kurt Hahn who was Head of the Schule Schloss Salem school in Germany from 1920 to 1933. London County Council also experimented with "outdoor schools" for a few years after WW1.

Raymond was very interested in medical-advancements but, in particular, was keen to help children at high risk of TB. "Delicate" and poor children from Oxford and East London were regular visitors to Hill End as at the time open-air treatment for pulmonary TB was the norm. This disease was a major killer until the advent of antibiotics during WW2. At the peak of activity at the Hill End Camp in 1938 there were eleven classrooms spread over the whole estate and many hundreds of schoolchildren attending, normally one day a week. To get an impression of what it was like, see this film: "[Summer School aka Children's Holiday Camp 1939](#)" (Pathé Film archive).

Normal use of Hill End finished for the duration of the war but Raymond encouraged scout groups to use the site as well as organising holidays for women who normally worked in munitions factories.

In 1939 daughter Hazel tragically died in her mid-thirties, due to two tumours and other complications as well. Things were never the same again. She was an amazing woman who not only started and organised the "Wytham Mouth-Organ Band" but also the "Wytham Players". Both groups were very successful and toured widely, particularly the "Wytham Players". Hazel also worked a lot with the unemployed in Kennington, London. She also wrote, directed and performed in quite a number of "silent" films, one of which survives, "Days of Chivalry" (1928). It is a very entertaining film, possibly best described as a cross between Valentino and Monty

Python and the Holy Grail! Hazel had a very special ability with all animals. Over a period of time she had many pets at the Abbey, including chameleons from South Africa, a favourite goat, sheep, meerkat, doves and a miniature horse. A meerkat in around 1917 was very unusual and “Rikki” was introduced to King George V on an occasion when he visited Oxford. There is a lovely stained-glass window in All Saints, Wytham, and the small figure of St Cecilia looks a little like Hazel. The window was organised by Hope ffennell for her parents, the Weigall family.

During WW2, a family of young evacuees from Poplar, East London lived in the Abbey, the oldest two being taught ju-jitsu and how to shoot by Raymond. For the early part of the war, Raymond became Captain of the Botley Home Guard, later hosting clay-pigeon competitions at the Abbey for members of the University.

With no direct heir, on 4 August 1942 Raymond entered into a Deed of Agreement with the University of Oxford for the Wytham estate. The agreement, partly by Deed of Covenant and partly by gift, resulted in almost all of the estate passing into the hands of the University. Some areas also became controlled by the University on 11 February 1943. Colonel ffennell died in 1944, hopefully realising by then that TB could be effectively treated by antibiotics. He was buried in the churchyard at All Saints, Wytham, next to daughter Hazel. He is also buried next to wife Hope who died in 1956.